

# ACTION RESEARCH IN EDUCATION

SECOND EDITION

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## RESEARCH ETHICS

The research design also includes ethical considerations that protect the well-being and interests of research participants. Punch (1994) suggests that "the view that science is intrinsically neutral and essentially beneficial disappeared with the revelations at the Nuremberg trials." Some well-known studies have shown that researchers are not always aware of potential harm that may come to those who participate in research studies (e.g., Horowitz, 1970; Milgram, 1963). Most public institutions and professional organizations have formal procedures to ensure that researchers do not knowingly or unknowingly put research participants at risk. The research design includes sound procedures for ensuring the safety of the participants. As Sieber (1992) indicates, sound ethics and sound methodology go hand in hand.

Universities have Internal Review Boards (IRB) to ensure the ethical conduct of research engaged in by students and faculty. Usually such boards require a copy of the proposal, and an indication of the procedures that will ensure the safety of research participants, including the confidentiality of research processes. Although each university will have its own set of rules, the following procedures provide a general means to satisfy most IRB regulations.

### Confidentiality, Care, and Sensitivity

When people talk for extended periods they often speak of very private matters, revealing highly problematic events or even potentially harmful information. A prime directive of social research is to protect the anonymity of participants. In practice it is best to assume that *all* information acquired is highly confidential. Where we require information to be shared with other participants or audiences, we must first ask relevant participants for permission to do so. When I read back my field notes, or share analyzed information with participants, I ask "Is there anything here you would not like to reveal to other people in this project?" If they appear unsure, I inform them that it may be possible to present the information, but to disguise its source. We can do this by using fictitious names, or by reporting it generally—"Some people suggest that . . ." or "Other participants provide a different perspective on . . ."

Aligned with confidentiality is the duty of care we have to participants. We need to ensure that information is stored securely so that others do not inadvertently see it. We certainly should not share recorded information with others without permission of the persons concerned, even if that information points to apparently harmful events in a person's life—drug abuse, physical abuse, and so on. This points to another possibility occasionally arising in the processes of extended interview—the recall of distressing events sometimes creates a deep emotional response. Duty of care requires researchers to provide sufficient time for the person to "debrief" by talking through issues or events to a point of comfort, or by putting the individual in contact with a family member or counselor who can assist in resolving the situation.

### Permissions

Permission is not usually required when teachers engage in research directly related to their ongoing work in the classroom. Where they engage in more extended studies involving other school staff, children from other classes, or parents, then they may need to obtain formal permission prior to commencing the project. To the extent that the research becomes a public process, therefore, where people's privacy or personal well-being is "at risk," written permission from a person in a position of authority is warranted—a principal, school district superintendent, or other relevant authority. In these circumstances it is necessary to provide information about the nature of the research, the significance of the study, and the

ways in which ethical considerations will be taken into account. It is useful to attach a copy of the research design to the request for permission to pursue the study.

Where research is associated with a university course or program, the institution itself will usually have processes for reviewing research through an ethics committee. A similar system operates in school districts. Though the procedures are sometimes unwieldy and time consuming, they provide a means of ensuring that people's privacy is not violated and that research processes do not interfere with their well-being.

### Informed Consent

In many contexts, protocols require those facilitating research to engage processes of informed consent. This requires the research facilitator and others engaged in data gathering to:

- Inform each participant of the purpose and nature of the study.
- Ask whether they wish to participate.
- Ask permission to record information they provide.
- Assure them of the confidentiality of that information.
- Advise them that they may withdraw at any stage and have their recorded information returned.
- Ask them to sign a short document affirming their permission.

The following document provides an example of how these processes are presented to participants and documented. A consent form not only provides information, but is a record of consent, so that copies should be provided to each signatory.

#### YOUTH RECREATIONAL FACILITIES IN LEDDINGHALL

Mrs. Miles' ninth-grade class at Ledinghall High School is concerned that no recreational facilities for young people are available in the district. They are now engaged in reviewing the services, facilities, and resources available to young people in the community and will invite young people who live there to tell of their experiences. On the basis of this study, the class will write a report on recreation for young people in the Ledinghall community to be presented to the town council.

#### Consent Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_ have read the above information and been informed of the nature of the study. I consent to being interviewed by a class member for this study. I understand that:

- All information will be kept confidential
- I may withdraw from the study at any time and have information I have given returned to me at that time
- I will not be identified in any way in reports arising from this study without my written permission

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**RESEARCH ETHICS**

Ethical procedures are established by:

1. **Confidentiality:** Privacy is protected by ensuring confidentiality of information.
2. **Permissions:** Permission is obtained to carry out the research from people in positions of responsibility.
3. **Informed consent:** Participants are informed of the nature of the study and provide formal consent to be included.